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Golden-mantled Ground Squirrel

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GOLDEN-MANTLED GROUND SQUIRREL

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GOLDEN-MANTLED GROUND SQUIRREL

Taking a hike in Idaho's mountains, you see a small animal scurrying around on a pile of rocks. You think it is a gigantic chipmunk, but look closely. Do you see stripes on its face? If the answer is no, the animal you are seeing is probably not a chipmunk. It might be a golden-mantled ground squirrel.

Golden-mantled ground squirrels are often confused for chubby chipmunks. Three things make the golden-mantled ground squirrel different from chipmunks. Golden-mantled ground squirrels are bigger and have a shorter, fluffier tail. The easiest way to tell them apart is to look at the face. Chipmunks have stripes on both their faces and their bodies. Golden-mantled ground squirrels have stripes only on the body. The adults' heads and shoulders are a beautiful reddish-brown color. This is the "mantle" that gives them their name.

Unlike other ground squirrels, golden-mantled ground squirrels are loners. Many ground squirrels live in large, complex colonies where the female ground squirrels live together and work as a group to collect food, raise young and look out for danger. Golden-mantled ground squirrels are different. They only spend time with their mother and siblings when young.

As their name suggests, golden-mantled ground squirrels live in the ground. The entrances to their burrows are usually near a log or rock. Burrows can exceed 100 feet in length and have several chambers. They have areas to store food, to rest and to raise young.

Most of the summer, golden-mantled ground squirrels are obsessed with food. They need to eat enough to put on a nice layer of fat to survive the winter. They also need to gather food to store for when they wake up from hibernation in the spring. Golden-mantled ground squirrels eat a lot of fungi. They locate it by smell and dig it out with their claws. They also eat leaves, seeds, nuts, roots and the occasional egg, bird, insect or dead animal they find. The winter is spent sleeping in their burrow.

After waking from hibernation, golden-mantled ground squirrels breed. The male and female do not stay together, so the female is left to raise the young on her own. Usually around five naked, blind and deaf babies are born. In about one week they start to grow fur and tiny whiskers emerge. After two weeks, their ears open and little teeth erupt. In about three weeks, their eyes open and their front teeth come in. This is when they start to explore their nest burrow and may even pop their heads out to discover the outside world. By late summer, they are on their own. If they can avoid predators like coyotes, weasels and hawks, golden-mantled ground squirrels may live to be seven years old.

Keep an eye out for these cute little squirrels when out and about in Idaho. They can be quite entertaining to watch as they scamper around stuffing food in their cheek pouches.



Golden-mantled
Ground Squirrel

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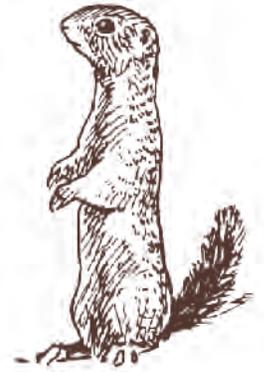


Chipmunk

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THE RODENT FAMILY



Golden-mantled ground squirrels are rodents. So are mice, beavers and porcupines. There are more rodents living in Idaho, and the world, than any other type of mammal.

Idaho's largest rodent is the beaver. Beaver may reach 50 pounds. The largest rodent in the world is the capybara (kap-ee-BAR-ah). They grow to be as big as pigs. Capybara can weigh more than 125 pounds, and they can be four feet long! They live near ponds and rivers in South America. One of the smallest rodents is the pygmy mouse found in Africa. It weighs about as much as an unsharpened pencil and is only two inches long.

The front teeth of a rodent never stop growing, so rodents need to chew on things. This keeps their teeth from growing too long. If they didn't chew on things to keep their teeth short, their teeth may actually circle around and grow into their skulls!

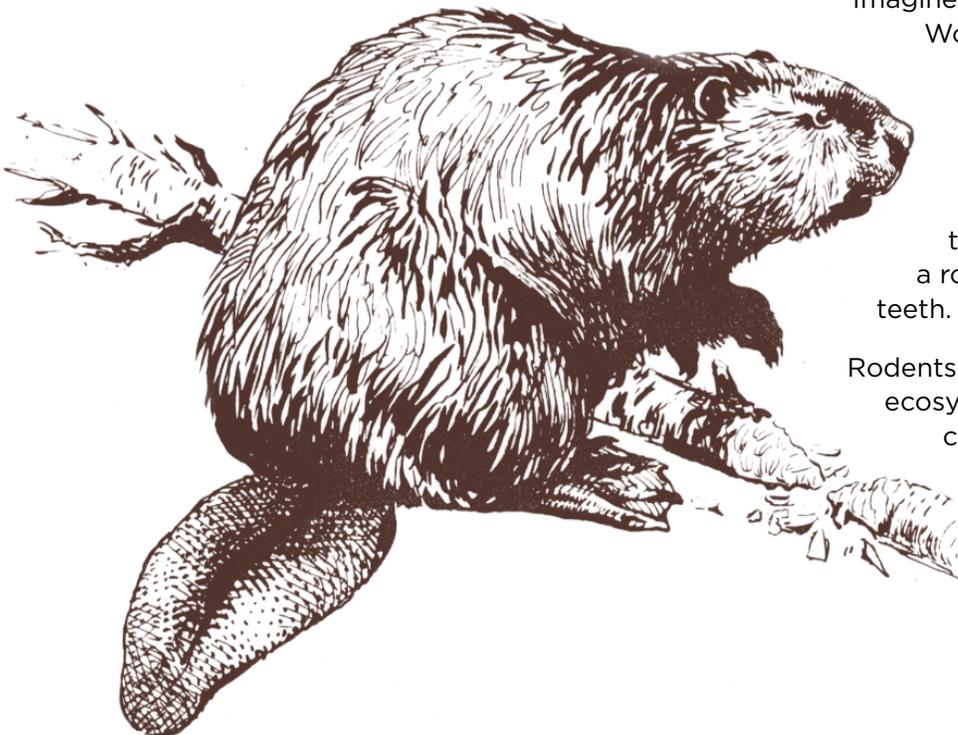
Do you have a pet rodent like a mouse, hamster or guinea pig? You may have noticed that your pet's front teeth are a yellow-orange color. Believe it or not, these teeth are supposed to be orange! The teeth are only orange on the outside. The other sides of the teeth are white. The orange color is special enamel. It helps to make the teeth strong and hard.

Imagine chewing down trees like beavers.

Wouldn't you want strong teeth?

The orange enamel also helps to keep their teeth sharp. The hard, orange enamel on the outside of the teeth wears down more slowly than the white enamel on the inside of the teeth. Every time a rodent takes a bite it sharpens its teeth. This keeps the teeth chisel-sharp.

Rodents are an important part of the ecosystem. They are links in food chains. Many rodents are food for other animals. Even people eat rodents. In Venezuela, people eat capybara. Venezuelans eat capybara during a traditional holiday, just like we eat turkey for Thanksgiving.





Getting Ready for Winter

The harsh, cold days of winter will soon be upon us. Freezing temperatures, blowing wind, rain, and snow not only affect us; they also affect wildlife. Fall is a busy time of year for wild animals. They must get ready for times when food will be more difficult to find. How do animals prepare for the rigors of winter?

Some animals leave. They migrate to warmer climates where food is easier to find. Some animals travel long distances. Birds are the animals you probably think of migrating, but there are other animals that also travel great distances. Can you name an insect that travels to southern California and central Mexico for the winter? It is our state insect, the monarch butterfly!

Other animals sleep through the long, harsh winter. Golden-mantled ground squirrels, marmots, bears and bats are just some of the animals that hibernate through the winter. Why do they hibernate? It's not the cold; it's the food. For animals that eat plants, food can be next to impossible to find. Most trees drop their leaves during the winter. Grass and fruits dry up and turn

brown or are buried under snow. It can be difficult to find good plants to eat in the winter. Idaho's bats eat insects. They would starve to death looking for insects in the winter. By hibernating and slowing down their body functions, animals are able to survive on their stored fat until food becomes available.

Many animals try and store enough food to get through lean times; they cache (CASH) or stockpile food. Beavers are animals that store food. Their pond is their pantry. Beavers cut limbs off of trees and stick them in the mud at the bottom of their pond. The bark on the limbs will help them make it through the winter. Golden-mantled ground squirrels also cache food. They collect seeds, fruits and fungi, but they don't eat this food during the winter. The stored food is eaten in the spring when plants are still recovering from winter and food is hard to find.

Can you think of other ways that animals prepare for winter? Head outside and see if you notice animals busy with winter preparations.

Warning - Do Not Feed!



Golden-mantled ground squirrels are known for their acting abilities. Many a hiker or camper has fallen victim to their big, begging eyes. They may run right up to a person or sneak into a backpack on the ground to see what treats it holds. It may seem harmless to toss them a nut, but don't do it! Feeding wild mammals is never a good idea. That one tossed nut may turn into a whole lot of problems.

Human food is not designed to nourish wild animals. Often human food is too high in salt for wild animals. That salted nut may lead to an imbalance in the animals' bodies causing them to become dehydrated. Animals' bodies have adapted and evolved to eat foods found in their habitats. An animal may love the taste of a human food, but their bodies may not be able to digest it. At best, a change of diet may lead to an upset stomach. In the worst case scenario, the animal may die.

Another problem with feeding wild animals is that they get used to being around humans. Most wild animals are naturally afraid of humans. When people feed animals, they sometimes lose this fear. They may become aggressive and bite when they don't get the food they are expecting. Animals that become aggressive toward humans often have to be killed to protect people.

The best advice is not to give into the begging! You may be saving other people a lot of trouble. You are also helping to make sure that Idaho's wildlife stays healthy and wild.



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It's *Thanksgiving* time

Thanksgiving's here! It is time to eat and stuff our stomachs with yummy food. Thanksgiving and Pilgrims seem to go together like bread and butter, but the Pilgrims never really held a Thanksgiving feast. Now, before you cancel dinner, read on and learn how our Thanksgiving came to be.

The Pilgrims did have a feast in 1621 after their first harvest of crops. This is the feast people often refer to as "The First Thanksgiving." This feast never happened again, and the Pilgrims would not have called it a "Thanksgiving." To the Pilgrims, a day of thanksgiving was a day of prayer and fasting, not eating!

The first harvest feast was held around the first of October and lasted three days! The pilgrims didn't have a building large enough to hold 140 people, 50 pilgrims and 90 Native Americans, so the feast was held outside.

Do you think the pilgrims and Native Americans ate the same foods we eat today? Some were the same. They ate deer, fish, wild turkeys, ducks, geese and other birds. They also ate Indian corn, wheat and berries. Do you think they ate corn of the cob? No, corn on the cob was not eaten.

Indian corn was only good for making cornmeal. What about ham or sweet potatoes? Nope, the Pilgrims didn't have pigs, and sweet potatoes hadn't been brought to New England yet. They did have cranberries, but they did not have sugar to make cranberry sauce. Do you think they ate pumpkin pie? Pilgrims did have pumpkins. They most likely made a pumpkin pudding sweetened with honey or maple syrup, but their pudding would not have had a crust.

The Pilgrim's feast was different from ours, but it became the model for our Thanksgiving of today. In 1863, Abraham Lincoln made the last Thursday in November a national holiday of Thanksgiving. Up to that time, no permanent holiday had been set. President Roosevelt changed the day of Thanksgiving to the fourth Thursday in November in 1941, and this is when we celebrate Thanksgiving today.

Wow! Who would have thought all this could have evolved out of a harvest feast?



Birds might be the first animal alarm that sounds off when you enter the woods. The loud “caw, caw” of crows tells the neighborhood that you are nearby. Listen to see if you hear other birds scolding you. Large mammals like deer snort to alert others of danger.

Animals also use silence to warn of danger. Frogs and toads stop singing when an intruder arrives at the pond. A hawk flying through the woods can silence singing birds.

Learning about animal alarms can help you be a quiet visitor to the forest. This is important if you are a hunter, bird watcher or wildlife photographer. A hunter crashing through the woods will come home empty-handed. The loud bird watcher or photographer won't see much. Next time you take a hike, see how far you can walk without tripping any wildlife alarms!

BE OUTSIDE
IDAHO CHILDREN IN NATURE

Wildlife Alarm Systems

Golden-mantled ground squirrels are usually silent, but not always. When they are alarmed, they make some pretty loud chirping and squeaking sounds. Red squirrels are another squirrel in Idaho's forests that are quite the alarm system. Their chattering and scolding alert other animals that danger is near. Animals that pay attention avoid danger by staying alert. At the sound of an alarm, they find shelter or leave the area. Take a walk in the woods to find other animal alarms - just listen! This time of year things may be quieter than in the spring or summer, but some animals may still be around to send out the alarm.



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A Squirrely Word Search

P Y R A T I L O S U G Y D W P
S R O O T S L W L A R E L B K
V Q M G S L H H N R L P E A D
Y C U D Q I U O U T N R A L S
Y R E E S I T C N R L I V A W
H E R K A D S A T R W H E R B
S I E U D K M F M X A C S M W
R R B L F N H F D J D D F C O
S E S E E F O O D B E G G A R
R R P D R F B E N G P D N L R
K O L M F N N E J U H L U L U
F O C U A O A R O D E N T K B
G A N K U C B T K T R J S O A
S G W M S M S C E W Q X O T M
I G E E E H C A C O E P A Q M

WORDS:

ALARM CALL
BURROW
CACHE
CHIRP
FOOD BEGGAR
FUNGI
FURRY
GOLDEN-MANTLED
HIBERNATE
LEAVES
NUTS
ROCKS
RODENT
ROOTS
SCAMPER
SCURRY
SEEDS
SOLITARY
SQUEAK
WHISKERS

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Lead Writer: Adare Evans

Layout: Glenna Gomez

Contributors: Adare Evans, Lori Adams, Vicky Runnoe



WE WOULD LIKE TO HEAR FROM YOU!

If you have a letter, poem or question for Wildlife Express,
it may be included in a future issue! Send it to:

adare.evans@idfg.idaho.gov

or

Wildlife Express, Idaho Fish and Game
PO Box 25, Boise, ID 83707